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THE LAST OF THE HADDONS

By Mrs NEWMAN, Author of 'Too Late,' &c

CHAPTER I. – 'INCONGRUOUS MATERIALS.'

'No. 81. Yes; this must certainly be the house,' I murmured, turning my eyes somewhat disappointedly towards it again, after consulting an address in my hand. A large, gloomy, dilapidated-looking house, in a respectably dull street in Westminster, its lower windows facing a dead-wall, and its upper ones overlooking venerable ecclesiastical grounds. The lower rooms appeared to be the only portion of the house which was occupied; and, to judge by the shabbiness of the blinds, they were kept but in a mean condition. None the less dreary was the present aspect of the house for the suggestions of by-gone prosperity in the noble proportions of the entrance, with its link-extinguishers on either side, and great massive doors opening from the centre. It would require a vivid imagination to picture those doors flung hospitably open, and light and warmth from within streaming down upon a gay party of the present generation, alighting before the broad steps.

'Not very promising,' was my mental comment, as I gathered courage to ascend the steps and lift the heavy iron wreath of flowers, which used to be considered high-art in the way of knockers. Nor was I certain that the house was inhabited at all, until I heard footsteps within, and presently one of the doors was opened a few inches and a bony hand thrust out.

'A pretty time this to be bringing coffee that was wanted for breakfast!'

'Does Mr Wentworth live here?'

A tall, thin, grim-visaged woman looked out, and shortly replied: 'Yes; he does.'

'Is he at home? Can I see him?'

'He's at home,' she slowly and reluctantly admitted: adding, as she determinedly blocked up the doorway: 'But he can't see anybody; he's engaged.'

'Please give this card to Mr Wentworth, and say' —

'If it's the advertisement, you should have come before. Ten to twelve was the time.'

'Please give this card to Mr Wentworth, and' —

'It won't be any use.'

'And say I shall be greatly obliged if he will see me for five minutes.'

Evidently this was a woman accustomed to have her way, at anyrate with such callers as came there. The very novelty of my persistence seemed for the moment to disconcert her, as she eyed me from beneath her bent brows before replying: 'Haven't I just told you?'

'Please give this card to Mr Wentworth, and say I shall be greatly obliged if he will see me for five minutes.'

She appeared for a moment undecided as to whether she should shut the door in my face or do my bidding; then ungraciously moved aside for me to pass into the hall, which I unhesitatingly did. Mumbling something to herself, which, to judge by her countenance, was the reverse of

complimentary to me, she left me standing on the mat, and went into a room on the right of the square hall, the stone floor of which was sparsely covered here and there with old scraps of carpet. I had just time to note that, poor and forlorn as everything looked, it was kept scrupulously clean, when I heard a man's voice, and the words: 'Did I not tell you?' uttered in a stern low voice.

'I know you did; and I told her, but she wouldn't take "No" for an answer.'

'Nonsense! Say I'm engaged; it's past the time. I have all but arranged with some one already. Get rid of her somehow, and do not disturb me again. I thought you prided yourself upon your ability to keep off intruders.'

'This one isn't like the others,' grumbled the old woman. 'She goes on hammering and hammering. However, I'll soon send her off now.'

A nice introduction this! I had not really believed that she was acting under orders, and I had too grave a reason for desiring an interview, to allow a disagreeable old woman to prevent my obtaining it. I felt that an apology ought to be made before I was 'sent off.' Advancing to the door of the room from which the voices came, and standing on the threshold, I said: 'Allow me to exonerate your housekeeper, sir' (it was really a pretty compliment to give that gaunt personification of shabbiness so sounding a title, and she ought to have been touched by it). 'I am afraid I was more pertinacious than are the generality of intruders, in my anxiety to obtain an interview.'

A gentleman sat facing me, frowning down at my card. A pen still in his hand, and the quantity of papers and pamphlets covering the large library-table at which he sat, seemed to shew that it had been no mere excuse about his being engaged. A tall, broad-chested man, with a fine massive head, and good if somewhat rugged features, looking at first sight, I fancied, about forty years of age. I saw that there were a great many books in the room, and two or three fine specimens of old carved furniture, in curious contrast with the small square of well-worn and well-mended carpet at the end of the room where he sat.

At sight of me he laid down his pen, and pushed his chair back from the table, ruffling up his already sufficiently ruffled-up hair with a look of dismay which was almost comical. As he appeared somewhat at a loss how to answer me, I added: 'I set out immediately I read the advertisement; and I hope you will excuse my being an hour and thirty-seven minutes late;' looking at my watch in order to be quite correct as to time.

A smile, which had a wonderfully improving effect upon him, dwelt for a moment on his lips, and remained in his eyes.

'Will you take a seat, Miss – Haddon?' consulting my card for the name. Then to the old woman: 'You need not wait, Hannah.'

Throwing a look over her shoulder at him, as though to say, 'I told you,' she went out and shut the door.

He placed a chair for me, then returned to the old-fashioned library-chair he had risen from, and courteously waited for me to begin. So far good – he was a gentleman.

'I will be as concise as possible, Mr Wentworth. I am seeking a situation of some kind, and can, I think, offer as good testimonials as any one who has not had an engagement before could have. If you have not yet decided upon engaging any particular lady, I shall be much obliged by your kindly looking through these;' taking a little packet of letters from my pocket, and placing it upon the table before him.

He was eyeing me rather curiously, and I earnestly went on: 'I have been accustomed to use both my brains and hands, and I would do my very best with either to earn a respectable living.'

'I fear that I am committed in another direction,' he said courteously.

'In that case, I can only hope that the lady upon whom your choice has fallen needs an engagement as much as I do,' I replied, trying to stifle a sigh.

'I am extremely sorry that you should be disappointed.'

'You are very kind' (for I felt that he really was sorry); 'but I am accustomed to disappointments; and there is a sort of poetical justice in this, after intruding upon you as I have done,' I said, trying to speak lightly.

'I am very sorry indeed,' he repeated.

'Pray do not think of it, Mr Wentworth,' rising from my seat; 'allow me to' —

'A moment, Miss Haddon. It is of the first importance to find a lady thoroughly competent to undertake the office, and to be candid, I do not feel quite sure that I have succeeded.'

'But if you are committed?'

'I have been considering that, and I do not think that I am wholly committed — only so far as having promised to communicate with one lady goes. For the moment, I could not arrange matters with my conscience. Out of those who were good enough to notice the advertisement only one appeared to me at all suitable. But,' he added apologetically, 'I ought to explain that the requirements are of a somewhat exceptional character.'

'May I ask what they are, Mr Wentworth?'

'Principally tact in dealing with incongruous materials, and the exercise of a healthy influence over a sensitive girl.'

'Tact in dealing with incongruous materials,' I repeated musingly. 'Yes; certainly I ought to know something about that.'

Our eyes met, and we both broke into a little laugh, as he said: 'Most of us have opportunities for acquiring a little experience of the kind.'

'And I think I may claim to have made use of my opportunities,' I rejoined, after a moment or two's deliberation. 'But the healthy influence over a sensitive girl,' I went on more doubtfully; 'people hold such very opposite opinions as to what *is* a healthy influence. I certainly should not like to have my own weaknesses petted.'

'You have been accustomed to training?'

'I have been accustomed to *be* trained, so far as circumstances could do it, Mr Wentworth,' I returned with a half-smile at the thought of all that was implied by my words. I could not enter into my history to him; I could not tell him what I had resigned in order to remain in attendance upon my dear mother. Indeed, she had been a confirmed invalid so long a time, that the giving up had ceased to cost anything; the dread of losing her having become my only trouble, though year by year the difficulty of getting the little luxuries she needed and keeping out of debt, had terribly increased. When the parting came, it took something from the bitterness of regret to think that she knew nothing of the difficulties which had beset us. 'Still,' I added, desirous of making the best of myself, and led on by his evident anxiety to select the right kind of association for his child, or whoever she was, to be as frank as himself, 'mine has been an experience which ought to be worth something. One's experiences are hardly to be talked of; but I honestly think you might do worse than engage me, if it is any recommendation to have been accustomed to struggle against adverse circumstances, as I think it ought to be. My testimonials are from the clergyman of the parish, the medical man who attended my mother during a long illness, and an old friend of my father's. The last is more complimentary than could be wished; but the first two gentlemen knew me during a long heavy trial, and, as I begged them to do, they have, I think, stated only what is fair to me.'

He was smiling, his eyes fixed upon me; and I went on interrogatively: 'It is a chaperon and companion for a young girl required — your daughter or ward, I presume?'

He laughed outright; and then I saw he was younger than I had at first supposed him to be. At most, he could not be over thirty-five, I thought, a little confused at my mistake.

'No relation, and I am glad to say, no ward, Miss Haddon. I am simply obliging a friend who resides out of town, in order to spare both him and the ladies replying to the advertisement unnecessary trouble, by seeing them here. To say that I have regretted my good-nature more than once this morning, would of course be impolite.'

'It must have been very unpleasant for you sitting in judgment over a number of women,' I said; 'almost as unpleasant as for them.'

'Pray do not think that I have ventured so far as that, Miss Haddon,' he returned with an amused look.

But I had not gone there to amuse him, so I simply replied: 'I think you were bound to do so, having undertaken the responsibility, Mr Wentworth;' and returned straight to business, asking: 'Do you think there is any chance for me?'

'Your manners convince me that you would be suited to the office, Miss Haddon. Mr Farrar is an invalid; and his daughter, for whom he is seeking a chaperon, is his only child, and motherless. That may excuse a little extra care in selecting a fitting companion for her, which every good woman might not be. There is only one thing' – He trifled with the papers before him a few moments, and then went on hesitatingly: 'The lady was not to be very young.'

Greatly relieved, I smiled, and put up my veil. 'I am not very young, Mr Wentworth. I was nine-and-twenty the day before yesterday.' It would be really too ridiculous to be rejected on account of being too young, when that very morning I had been trying to lecture myself into a more philosophic frame of mind about the loss of my youth, and had failed ignominiously. The loss of youth meant more to me than it does to most people.

'Ah! Then I think we may consider that the only objection is disposed of,' he gravely replied.

Relieved and glad as I was at this decision, I could not but think it curious that he had not first examined my testimonials. For one so cautious in some respects, this omission appeared rather lax. But I still allowed them to lie on the table, as his friend might desire to see them, though he did not.

'Am I to write to your friend, Mr Wentworth?'

'I was to ask the lady selected, to go to Fairview as soon as she conveniently could, Miss Haddon,' presenting me with a card upon which was the address – Mr Farrar, Fairview, Highbrook, Kent.

'To make arrangements with Mr Farrar?' I inquired, not a little surprised at the suddenness with which matters seemed to be settling themselves.

'To remain, if you are willing so to do, Miss Haddon. But I ought to state that the engagement may possibly be for only a limited period; not longer than a year, perhaps. Miss Farrar is engaged to be married.' ('Ah, now I understand your anxiety about her finding a suitable companion,' was my mental comment.) 'She will not leave her father in his present state of health; but in the event of his recovery, there is some talk of her marriage in a year or so.'

'I do not myself desire a long engagement, Mr Wentworth,' I replied, with a slight pressure of a certain locket on my watch-chain. If the illusions of youth were gone, certain things remained to me yet.

He looked a little curious, I fancied, but simply bowed; too much a gentleman to question about anything not connected with the business in hand.

'Was there any mention made of salary, Mr Wentworth?'

'Salary? O yes. I really beg your pardon. Something was said about eighty or a hundred a year. But there were no restrictions about it. You will find that Mr Farrar is' – Whatever he was about to say, he hesitated to say; and after a moment's pause, substituted the word 'liberal. He is a man of large means, Miss Haddon.'

I was rather surprised at the amount; and in my inexperience of such matters, I failed to take into account the appearance a chaperon would be expected to make. The little I had hitherto been able to do in the way of money-getting had brought but very small returns. But then it had been done surreptitiously, whilst my dear mother was sleeping. She had been too anxious about me to be allowed to know that her small pension did not suffice for our expenses; and mine had been such work and for such pay as I could obtain from shops in the neighbourhood. 'Eighty pounds a year certainly is liberal; I did not hope for anything so good as that,' I replied. Then I once more rose, and bade him good-

morning, begging him to excuse my having taken up so much of his time. 'In truth, Mr Wentworth, I was getting almost desperate in my sore need.'

'I can only regret that a gentlewoman should be put to so much inconvenience, Miss Haddon; although it bears out my creed, that gentlewomen are more capable of endurance than are their inferiors.'

All very nice and pleasant of him; but even while he spoke, I was painfully conscious that I should have the greatest difficulty in getting out of the room as a gentlewoman should. The sudden revulsion – the great good fortune – coming so swiftly after bitter disappointments, told, I suppose, upon my physical strength, lowered by a longer fast than usual. In fact, a course of discipline in the way of bearing inconvenience, was telling upon me just at the wrong moment; and it seemed that his pretty compliment about a gentlewoman's capability of endurance was about to be proved inapplicable to me. The furniture appeared to be taking all sorts of fantastic shapes, and he himself to be expanding and collapsing in the most alarming manner. But angry and ashamed as I felt – could anything be more humiliating than an exhibition of weakness at this moment – I strove to smile and say something about the heat, as with some difficulty I made my way towards the door.

'But I fear – Pray allow me,' he ejaculated, springing towards the door, where I was groping for the handle, telling myself that if I could only get into the hall and sit there in the fresh air a few moments, all would be well again.

ITALIAN BRIGANDAGE

When we were at Naples a few years ago, and wished to make an excursion to Paestum – which would have occupied only two days altogether in going and returning – the landlord of our hotel strongly discommended the attempt. The roads, he said, were unsafe. Brigands might lay hold of the party, and great trouble would ensue. As this advice was corroborated by what we heard otherwise, the proposed excursion was given up. Perhaps, since that time things may have improved on the route to Paestum; but from all accounts, brigandage is as rife as ever in the south of Italy and Sicily, or has rather become much worse.

The Italians have generally been congratulated on their establishment of national independence. The many petty states into which the country had been divided for centuries, are now united into a single kingdom, with Rome as the capital. All that sounds well, and looks well. But here is the pinch. The south of Italy is now much more disturbed and kept in poverty by brigands than it was when under the Bourbons. A nominally strong and united government is apparently less able or willing to keep robbers in subjection than a government of inferior pretensions, which used to be pretty roundly abused and laughed at. Possibly, the political convulsion that led to the consolidation of power may have bequeathed broken and dissolute bands, which took to robbery as a profession. Possibly, also, the dissolution of monastic orders may have had something to do with the present scandalous state of affairs. A still more expressive reason for the corrupt state of society has been assigned. This consists in the feebleness of the laws and administrative policy of the country. Capital punishments have been all but abolished. The most atrocious crimes are visited by a condemnation to imprisonment for years or for life; but the punishment is little better than a sham, for prisoners contrive in many instances to escape, through the connivance of their jailers, or get loose in some other way. In a word, the law has no terrors for the criminal, who is either pardoned or gets off somehow. He is coddled and petted as an unfortunate being – looked upon rather as a hero in distress than anything else. In this view of the matter, the blame for the wretched condition of Southern Italy rests mainly on those higher and middle classes who are presumably the leaders of public opinion.

There is a moral blight even beyond what may be suggested by these allegations. It is absolutely asserted that there are vast numbers of persons, high and low, from the courtier to the peasant, who, for selfish purposes, wink at brigandage and theft. Strange tales have been told of a confederation in Naples, known as the *Camarista*, the members of which live by extorting under threats a species of black-mail on every commercial transaction. Shopkeepers are laid under contribution for a share in the profits of every sale they happen to make. And it has been said, that a cabman is expected to deliver up a percentage of every fare he pockets. As little has been lately heard of the *Camarista*, we entertain a hope that, taking shame to itself, the municipality has successfully stamped out this illegal and intolerable tyranny.

If we take for granted that the *Camarista* has disappeared or been abated, it is certain that in Sicily a much more cruel species of oppression, called the *Mafia*, is still in a flourishing condition. The *Mafia* might almost be called a universal conspiracy against law and order. Its basis is terror. All who belong to the confederacy are protected, on the understanding that they aid in sheltering evil-doers and facilitating their escape from justice. On certain terms, they participate in the plunder of a successful act of brigandage. Men in a high position, for instance, who are seen driving about in elegant style, derive a part of their income from the contributions of robbers, whom by trickery they help to evade the law. Just think of nearly a whole community being concerned in this species of underhand rascality! Neither law nor police has any chance of preserving public order. Society is rotten to the backbone. Who knows but the higher government officials, while ostentatiously hounding on Prefects to do their duty, are all the time pocketing money from the audacious wretches whom they affect to denounce? If the persons in question are not open to this suspicion, they at least, by their

perfunctory proceedings, are chargeable with scandalously tolerating a condition of things disgraceful to their country.

No doubt, the government officials ostentatiously offer large rewards for the capture of certain notorious brigands; but they must well know that the public are in such a terror-stricken state that no one dares to bring malefactors to justice. The greatest ruffians swagger about unchallenged. Local magistrates are so intimidated and brow-beaten by them, that they are fain to let them go about their business. It is perfectly obvious that the civil authorities are powerless. Nothing but martial law, firmly administered, is fit to check the disorder. The Carabinieri, a species of armed police, seem to be a poor-spirited set. A few companies of French gendarmerie, with authority to capture, try, and shoot every brigand, would very speedily render Southern Italy as quiet and orderly as any part of France or England.

Within the last two or three years several cases of brigandage in Sicily have been made known through the newspapers. One of the latest, which occurred early in November 1876, was that of Mr Rose, an Englishman connected with a mercantile firm in Sicily. 'Mr Rose and his brother with two servants (so runs the account) alighted at the railway station of Lercara. There Mr Rose mounted a horse, accompanied by one of the servants. His brother followed in a carriage with the other servant. Other carriages appeared immediately behind the brothers filled with apparently friendly people. At a turn of the road suddenly the celebrated brigand Leone, on whose head a reward of one thousand pounds has been set for three years, presented himself, with three other men, all well mounted. Leone caused Mr Rose to dismount and take another horse, and made for the village of Montemaggiore. Mr Rose, looking back, saw his brother in the carriage and other carriages following. He dismounted, ran towards his brother, thinking the party would outmatch the brigands, and called to them for help. But Leone riding up dared the whole party to raise a finger. All seemed paralysed. Mr Rose offered fifty thousand lire as ransom. Leone contemptuously shrugged his shoulders, made Mr Rose remount, and carried him off. Four hours after, the Carabinieri were informed of the matter, and the chase of Leone began, but came to nothing. It appears that Mr Rose had to ride for sixteen hours on horseback. His horse being at last exhausted, had to be abandoned. They arrived at a cave on the morning of the 5th inst., and remained there seven days, being abundantly supplied with provisions. On the eighth night the brigands, knowing that they were pursued by an armed force, abandoned the cave and remained on the march all night, the same thing occurring every subsequent night until the captive was released. From morning until mid-day they remained stationary in a wood, supporting themselves on poor fare, consisting of bread, cheese, and wine. In the afternoon the brigands, knowing that the troops were reposing, made prudent exploring excursions. Mr Rose never undressed from the time of his capture until he returned home. He was set at liberty near the Sciarra Railway Station, and the brigands gave him a mantle and a cap, with a third-class passenger ticket.' Mr Rose was liberated only on giving a ransom of four thousand pounds.

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